

## Shanghaied by Ghoststar

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**Summary:**

In which Steve meets three baby Pokémon trainers in Petalburg Woods and suddenly he's being dragged all over Hoenn by them and their friends.

## 1. Episode 1: The Mossy Rock

Steve had been in Petalburg Woods dozens of times. When he had first started training Pokémon he had gone through a bit of a bug phase, which had ended when he caught his first [Wurmple](#). Winky and he had parted rather quickly, Winky going off to make little Wurmple babies and Steve on to try catching a [Fletchling](#). So Steve was familiar with Petalburg Woods. You'd think it'd be easy to find a giant, mossy rock.

It really, really wasn't.

"Do you feel anything yet?" He asked his [Eevee](#) as she made her way through some tall grass. He could just barely see her tail peaking over the top. Even so, she turned to look at him and he got the distinct feeling she was judging him. "What? It's a mystic rock and you're a Pokemon. It seems pretty straight forward to me."

Her tail twitched and she continued walking. He trailed after her, shuddering as something darted past his leg. At least it wasn't trying to kill him. Everything in Petalburg Woods seemed to be trying to lately.

Steve wouldn't even be in the woods if it wasn't for Eevee. They had already been to Shoal Cave to visit the icy rock. It had taken ages to get down to it. By the time they had found it, Steve had been soaking wet and freezing. He was just ready to get things over with and leave. Instead, Eevee had taken one look at the rock and turned her nose up at it. That reaction was starting to become a pattern.

Eevee stopped abruptly and Steve almost tripped over her. She didn't pay any attention to him, her ears up, and tail swishing. She looked back at him for just a moment before she bolted off through the tall grass.

"Hey!" He shouted and took off after her. The grass was thick and seemed to grab onto his pants and shoes. It was difficult to keep up and even harder to keep her in sight. She left a thin trail of bent grass behind her and not much else. Her tall ears didn't even peak above the blades.

Eevee curved to the right and shot off between a couple of trees. Steve hurried after her, legs starting to burn. The grass was thinner beneath the trees, easier to stamp down and kick through. It was darker though and Steve's skin prickled under the curious gaze of Pokémon hiding just out of sight. Steve wished he had more repel spray, but he had run out hours ago. He just hoped nothing decided to pick a fight before he caught up with Eevee. It would be hell trying to find her if he got delayed by a battle.

It was only moment later when Steve heard what had caught Eevee's attention. Raised voices were echoing through the forest, growing louder by the moment. He couldn't understand what was being said, but he could tell there was more than one person. He didn't need to hear the exact words to recognize the tone either. It was easier to keep pace with Eevee when he knew where she was heading. He caught up to her easily after that, pace matching her's.

"-home right now, Max," was the first clear words he heard. Steve couldn't tell much from just a voice, but he could that the person was an adult and angry.

"No! I'm thirteen, I have my license! You can't make me go back." A girl shouted back.

He heard a scuffle, someone's panicked, "let me go," and then the man's voice was back.

"You're going home. Either that, or your friends start getting hurt."

"Leave him alone!" A third voice shouted.

Eevee reached the underbrush and careened through it without a moment of hesitation. Steve had a bit more trouble getting through. The two of them spilled out into a small clearing and Steve saw who had been making all the noise. A boy was holding an injured [Phantump](#) protectively against his chest, while a girl- Max apparently-was fighting to get an older boy to release Max's friend. They all looked vaguely familiar, though Steve couldn't figure out why.

Eevee didn't slow at all. With a snarl, she dove at the older boy and chomped down on his leg. He let go of the other boy with a grunt. He kicked Eevee off his leg, sending her rolling across the ground. She got back onto her feet, shook her head, and bared her teeth at him.

"Eevee!" Steve shouted and snatched her up. Not because he was worried about her attacking someone, but because he didn't want her getting hurt.

The children grabbed at each other, quickly backing away from the older boy. Steve recognized him in a rush and narrowed his eyes. Billy Hargrove was suppose to be blazing his way through the Elite Four, if all the gossip was to be believed. He was not suppose to be beating up on teenagers in the middle of the woods.

"What the hell is going on here?" Steve demanded and slowly moved to placed himself between Billy and the kids. Eevee growled, the sound coming from deep in her chest. she wiggled in his arms, trying to get down so she could have another go. Steve hung on to her, though it was a struggle.

Billy hardly spared him a glance. His pants were starting to cling to his leg, small spots of blood bleeding through the fabric. "Mind your own damn business. This is between me and my sister."

Eevee snapped her teeth and wrenched herself out of Steve's arms. She landed on the ground, fur standing on end. She looked a bit like a bushy, brown wig with ears that had escaped into the forest. Steve was rather familiar with the look and the attitude that came with it. It had been a while since he had seen it, but he knew what came next.

Steve looked up and said, "Yeah, that's not going to happen, Hargrove."

A hand touched his arm and an urgent voice whispered, "he has a [Darmantain](#) and a [Granbull](#)."

Steve chanced a glance behind him, just long enough to take in the pale, worried faces looking back at him. "Thanks," Steve whispered back and the boy with the Phantump smiled.

"Are you challenging me to a battle? With that?" Billy Hargrove threw his head back and laughed. When he was done, he sat his hand on his belt. "If that's what you want, let's do this." His fingers brushed over one of the Poké Balls.

Steve was faster. He only had three Poké Balls on him and one was pretty much always empty. He had the Poké Ball in his hand, enlarged, and then thrown in only a few seconds. Red light burst out and faded fast, leaving a rather large Pokémon behind. Pix lifted her head slowly, white paw lowering to the ground. She had been grooming herself when he had interrupted. She looked at Steve, then at the scene around her. Her head turned, focusing on Billy as cold air rolled off her in visible waves.

"Dude," the Phantump kid breathed.

"Holy shit. How do you have an Alolan [Ninetails](#)?" The other boy asked.

Steve started to say she was a gift from his parents, but then remembered there was more important things to do.

"Fuck him up," Max hissed viciously. She had a hand clasped over her arm, where a red mark was fading into a bruise.

"That's not going to help you." Billy warned and enlarged his Poké Ball.

Steve didn't give him the chance to finish. "You know what to do, Pix." He told her.

She stood, tails swaying behind her. She stretched slowly, putting on a show. Steve wondered how he had ended up with a bunch of assholes for Pokémon. She glanced back to make sure she had an audience and then she was off. She swept across the clearing like a winter breeze, a white blur that left snowflakes spinning in the air behind her. Steve watched for only a moment before he snatched Eevee up and started bustling the kids towards the trees.

"Hey! We can't just leave!" They protested, all of them twisting and turning to look back.

Max craned her head to see, a grin splitting across her face when she saw the wall of ice Pix was building around Billy. It would leave just enough room for Billy to stand, but not enough for him to let out his Dramantian. In this heat, it wouldn't take that long to melt, but it was more than long enough to put Billy far behind the lot of them.

With one last loop, Pix finished off the wall and lopped towards them.

"You fucking cheater!" Billy shouted, striking the wall of ice and finding it solid. The boys looked back, equally delighted smiles lit up their faces.

Steve didn't glanced back, but didn't stop to admire Pix' work. He nudged the kids along and they let him. Max threw up her hand and flipped Billy off and then they were passing through the underbrush and back into the woods. Soon enough they were too far away to hear Billy Hargrove screaming obscenities after them.

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"Why didn't you fight him," the boy, Lucas, asked some time later.

They were in a small clearing about twenty minutes away from Billy. A tree had fallen, leaving behind a gap in the tree canopy. Saplings and weeds were growing in abundance, fighting to dominate the clearing and claim the light.

Steve looked up from where he was checking on Eevee. He didn't have any medicine on him but she didn't seem to need any. She was lucky she hadn't gotten hurt, which was more than Steve could say for the kids' Pokémon. There wasn't an uninjured one between them, but at least they were all conscious. Billy had done a number on their Pokemon before just deciding to beat them up in person.

Steve blinked, then shrugged. "I don't do Pokémon battles." It was more or less the truth. He hadn't participated in one in years.

"But you have a Ninetails." Lucas pointed out.

"And an Eevee and a [Talonflame](#)." Steve agreed. Seeing the look on Lucas' face, he said, "I didn't say I never have, just that I don't."

"But why not?" He asked, sounding exasperated.

"Does it matter?" Dustin, the boy with the Phantump asked. The Phantump looked exhausted but reluctant to sleep. He made no move to escape from Dustin's arms. "I think we can all agree that that was awesome."

"It was all Pix." Steve gestured to where she was laying in the grass, watching them through heavy lidded eyes. "I'm sure she'd appreciate being called awesome." In response she let out a huff and turned her head away.

Max turned her attention away from Pix and back to Steve. "Why did you help us?"

"Did you want me to keep walking?"

Max crossed her arms over her chest. "Why are you even here?" She demanded.

"I'm looking for a mossy rock. You know, the one you use to get Leafions."

Max frowned and exchanged looks with Dustin and Lucas.

It was Dustin that said, "that's like right off the main trail. You are on the wrong side of the woods."

"Seriously? I've been looking for two days."

"Well," Lucas started slowly. "If you can get us back to the main trail, we can point you in the right direction."

"And while you're doing that, we can go to a Pokémon Center," Dustin murmured.

Steve looked at the kids, then nodded. He stood up, picking up Eevee before she could get it into her head to run off again. Pix sauntered over, nuzzling his side before poking her nose against her Poké Ball. Steve got the message. A moment later she disappeared the same way she had appeared. He figured she was going to take a nap.

"Alright, let's go." He told them and headed off in what he was pretty sure was the direction of the main trail.

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"What were you doing this far out here anyway?" Steve asked nearly an hour later. They had finally found the path, though mostly due to luck. The kids had spent the walk talking among themselves and Steve had kept an eye out for any wild Pokémon. He had seen a few Parasels lurking about, though they hadn't approached.

Both Lucas and Max pointed at Dustin and his Phantump. Dustin got a stubborn look on his face.

"We were traveling with our friends to Rustboro City." Dustin explained. "I saw this little guy and didn't want to leave without him so we split up."

"We were suppose to meet up like three hours ago," Max muttered, kicking a rock. "We would have already been there if Billy hadn't shown up."

"Why was he here?" Steve asked. "Isn't he suppose to be at the Pokemon League or something?"

"He's suppose to be." She frowned in thought. "I guess Neil made him leave to come and get me."

"Neil?"

"His dad. My step-dad. He really didn't want me to leave Littleroot."

"Aha," Steve snapped his fingers. "I knew I've seen you lot before."

The three of them stared at him in confusion.

"My ex-girlfriend lived in Littleroot." Steve explained.

Dustin squinted at him for a moment, then said, "wait. You dated Nancy, right? That means you're Steve Harrington."

"Last I checked," Steve agreed.



Lucas swung around abruptly to look at him. "You're Steve Harrington? What the hell, man? How could you not *"do"* Pokémon battles anymore?"

Max glanced between the two of them and asked, "Am I missing something?"

"Yes! Steve was like the fastest trainer ever to reach the Elite Four."

"I'm pretty sure that's not true," Steve said but he couldn't fight the smile pulling at his mouth.

"Seriously? Holy shit, that's cool. Did you beat them?" Max asked eagerly.

The smile slipped away and Steve shrugged. "Nah."

The casual denial didn't put them off at all. Steve pushed them along until they started walking again, though they were too busy talking to notice.

"Did you reach Benny Hammond? He uses ground type, right?"

"And dragon," Steve found himself saying.

"Did he kick your ass?" Dustin asked.

"I bet he totally kicked your ass." Lucas agreed.

"He didn't kick my ass," Steve laughed. "Kali did though. Her Alakazam obliterated my team."

The kids nodded, like that made perfect sense. Then again, knowing Kali, it did.

Dustin peered at him curiously. "So, why didn't you try again? After you lost, I mean."

Steve frowned. In his arms, Eevee huffed and wiggled around to lay her head on his shoulder. It was a comforting gesture.

"I found something I enjoyed more than battling," he finally said. It

wasn't the whole truth, but he wasn't about to sell his whole life's story for a couple of pleading looks. He had some self respect.

"And that is?" Max asked.

Steve looked past her and the boys. The trees parted a couple hundred feet up ahead and the dirt path became more well trod. Light spilled into the woods and Steve could almost make out the little flower shop that lay beyond. The other side of Route 104 was a welcome sight.

"There's the road to Rustboro." Steve pointed. He stepped around and in front, trying to look stern as he asked, "so where's my rock?" It was kind of hard to pull the look off with Eevee sleeping in his arms.

"But-" Max started, blinking at him several times.

"My rock," he repeated.

"It's over there," Lucas said, pointing off to the right.

It took Steve a second to see it. The path was mostly overgrown, full of thick brush and several trees. It really was no wonder that he had missed it the first few times he had walked by. Someone really need to clear the path.

"Alright." Steve turned back to the kids and nodded at the road. "Just follow Route 104 until you reach the city. The Pokémon Center is behind the Poké Mart. You can't miss it."

The kids all looked slightly mutinous, though Steve couldn't figure out why. He had put them on the right path, just like he had agreed to. He hadn't said anything about getting them into the city. Anyway, it's not like they could get into any serious trouble without him. Route 104 always had someone on it. Steve was sure they'd be alright. He wouldn't leave them otherwise.

"Thanks, man," Dustin finally said, breaking the odd tension.

"Yeah. Thanks." Max and Lucas echoed.

"No problem. Just try to steer clear of Billy until he cools off."

Lucas rolls his eyes, probably thinking *obviously*.

"Sure, we can handle that. Maybe we'll see you again in Rustboro?" Dustin asked.

"Yeah, maybe," Steve agreed. "Now get a move on. Go take care of your Pokemon."

That got the kids moving. They were almost out of the forest before they stopped to wave to him, yelling goodbyes. Steve waved back. Then he hitched Eevee a little higher and set off back into the woods.

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It took him less than thirty minutes to reach the mossy rock. A fraction of the time he had spent looking for it. Most of that time had been struggling through the thicker areas, since none of his Pokémon knew Cut. Someone really needed to put up a sign or something. Either way, he had finally found the fucking rock.

It was incredibly underwhelming. It was literally just a great, moss covered rock in the middle of the forest. He guessed it felt nice to be near it, but that could just be the accomplishment talking. He highly doubted that he was feeling it the same way a Pokémon would.

After a moment, Eevee hopped out of his arms and made her way over. Steve held his breath as she got close enough to sniff the mossy rock, putting her front paws on it. Her head tilted and-

She sneezed.

"Are you serious?" He demanded as she made her way back over to him.

She sat at his feet, looking up at him with big, sappy eyes. It took him a second to realize what she was doing. He clamped a hand over his eyes and pointed at her.

"No. No way. You're not getting out of this that easy. You dragged us around these woods for two days. And all so you could sneeze on a rock?"

She pawed at his foot. Steve shook his head. She did it again and made a sad little noise. Steve couldn't stop it. He caved and looked down at her. She had put away the baby doll eyes and was instead just staring at him.

Steve sighed and asked, "you don't want to be a Leafeon, do you?"

She shook her head.

"You could have mentioned that before," he muttered. She swatted at him. "Alright, alright. We'll figure out something else."

That seemed to cheer her up. With one last pat to his foot, she hoped to her feet and started back the way they had come. Grumbling, Steve followed.

"Hey, if you evolve into an Espeon you can learn cut," he called.

She didn't even look at him.

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Leaving Petalburg Woods was a relief. Steve was thoroughly sick of grass and trees and bug Pokémon. Eevee had string clinging to her fur from one too many Wurmple's ganging up on her and it would take forever to get rid of it all. They slowly made their way up Route 104, savoring the breeze and fading light. What he really wanted was to find a nice hotel and sleep for week, though he was pretty sure Eevee wouldn't let him, not until they had gotten some real food.

The dirt road had just ended and the stone began when Steve heard someone call his name. Steve's head came up and out of the corner of his eye he could see Eevee's ears perking up. Then she was trotting off, tail high and swishing happily. Steve fell into step next to her, a smile tugging at his mouth.

"What are you three doing?" He asked, stopping just shy of where they were sprawled out on the grass next to the road. They had shed their backpacks, Max and Lucas using theirs as pillows while Dustin was digging around inside of his.

"Obviously waiting for you," Max said with a roll of her eyes.

The three of them looked tired, but not pale like they had in the woods. Dustin's Phantump floated along beside him, refreshed and ready to take on the world. Steve wondered why they were on this side of Rustboro instead of reuniting with their friends. He asked them as much.

"They're half way to Verdanturf Town already. There's no way we can catch up before dark so we're staying here tonight. We figured we might as well stay with you."

Steve looked at them and guessed, "you're broke, aren't you?"

Three abashed faces met his words. Steve wanted to rub his face, but his hands were dirty and grass stained. There was no telling what he'd be smearing across his face if he did.

"Oh fine. But just for tonight, got it? In the morning, you can catch up to your friends and freeload off them."

"Yeah, yeah, this is a limited time offer, we get it," Max nodded along. "Come on, Steve, let's go get some food."

"Ooh, there's a restaurant i want to try. It just opened up and they have like a mile long wait line," Dustin said, zipping his bag and getting to his feet. He shrugged his backpack on while Max and Lucas did the same.

"A mile? We'll starve to death before we even get inside. Pick somewhere else."

"Come on, Steve. Live a little."

"Yeah, come on, Steve," Lucas wheedled. "Don't tell us that a six course meal wouldn't hit the spot right about now. You can't, can you?"

At his feet, Eevee made a noise that Steve had always suspected was a laugh. He couldn't even muster up a decent glare before the kids were sweeping him off down the street. Steve struggled to keep up and to take control back before he ended up promising to spend every cent he had. It was harder than he expected.

All the while, Eevee padded along, completely satisfied with herself.

## 2. Episode 2 Part 1: Rusturf Tunnel

"Wake up, shithheads," Steve called, kicking dirt into the fire pit. It had burned out sometime during the night, but Steve wasn't keen on starting a forest fire. Hoenn wasn't exactly known for its [Squirtle Squads](#). "It's time to get moving!"

"Leave me alone," Max groaned, snuggling deeper into her sleeping bag. Her [Growlithe](#) was sprawled over her, while her recently caught [Joltik](#) huddling in the folds of her backpack. The Joltik had been slowly draining the battery of Max's Pokédex, if all the grumbling she had done night before was any indication.

"If only I wouldn't be held responsible," Steve assured her. He nudged her with his toe and got a fist in the leg for his efforts.

"What time is it?" Lucas asked groggily, crawling out of his sleeping bag. By the time he got to his feet he had grass stains on his pants. Then again it was hard to tell the new stains from the old.

"It's nine," Dustin said, shoving his Pokédex back in his backpack.

It had surprised Steve that all the kids had one. Professor Clarke of Littleroot must really think these kids were something. Steve thought they were something too. Mostly assholes, but that was besides the point.

"Nine?" Lucas asked and started back for his sleeping bag. "Wake me up at one."

Steve yanked the sleeping bag away and shook it. "Absolutely not. We're getting to Verdanturf Town today or I'm going to feed you to a swarm of [Nicasas](#)."

Dustin made a noise in his throat and explained, "They're herbivores, Steve."

"Not if you don't all get up," Steve threatened and tossed Lucas his sleeping bag. He crouched next to Max and patiently started tearing the sleeping bag out of her clutching hands.

Max's head appeared, hair a great tangled mess and eyes narrowed into a glare. "I'll get you for this," she vowed, but finally kicked her way out of the sleeping bag and got up.

Steve almost pointed out that she already had. In the three days it took the kids to get their Stone Badge- because they absolutely would *not* leave Rustboro without it- they had made a sizable dent in Steve's savings. Sure, he could ask his parents for money, but he'd didn't want to. Neither of them had been happy about him giving up on becoming Champion. They might have been more open to it if he had actual given them a reason besides, "I'd rather not."

When they had asked, "well, what do you want to do?" Steve hadn't been able to give an answer. He just knew that he didn't want to be Champion anymore. Unfortunately that answers was rarely considered a good enough reason. His brief stint working at a Pokémon daycare had been met it firm disapproval.

The traveling around Hoenn with Eevee, searching for Evolution Stones and the like, was a rather recent development. It was a lot like reliving his own Pokémon journey, but actually being prepared for it this time around. The three thirteenth years olds was really drilling that feeling into his head.

"I'm sure you will." Steve said and clapped his hands. "But first get your shit. We've got a horrible, deadly tunnel to walk through."

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Rusturf Tunnel wasn't actually all that bad. No one had died in it for nearly a century and the amount of injuries gained within was realitvely low for a cave. (Or rarely reported, which was always a possiblity.) The tunnel was known for being home to a herd of [Whismurs](#), but they hadn't seen so much as a glimpse of one since entering. They were probably just skittish of such a large group of people. The cave also didn't have a single [Zubat](#) in sight, which Steve was grateful for. With how loud the kids were, they would have been dealing with a never ending swarm of them.

"When we get to Verdanturf, we have got to get some food," Dustin complained from the back. Phantump was in his Poké Ball, though



not too happily. He preferred to be carried, but there was only so long someone could lug a Phantump around. Steve was surprised Dustin managed to do it as often as he did.

Steve had woken up twice in Rustboro with Phantump sleeping on his chest. The near suffocation had only stopped when Dustin had stepped in. It wasn't like Eevee was going to be any help. She had abandoned him for one of the two twin beds the kids were using, while Steve ended up sleeping on the couch. She hadn't even had the decency to look guilty about it.

"We would still have food if we hadn't had to camp last night," Steve shot back. He shuddered when Joltik suddenly jumped from Max's shoulder to his. Joltik settled just in the corner of Steve's peripheral. Steve had a feeling Joltik just wanted to remind him on why they had ended up camping the night before. Max had spent so much time trying to catch Joltik, it had become too dark to find the tunnel.

"I think it was worth it," Max said breezily.

"Neither of you can say shit when it's my turn to chase a Pokémon," Lucas said, speeding up slightly to keep pace with the others. "Not one word."

Steve had no doubt that they would, in fact, complain incessantly about it. From the little time he had known them, he had figured out several things. Mainly: the the kids argued just to argue more times than not.

"So," Dustin interrupted. "Can you eat a Poké Puff?"

"No. No," Steve repeated, turning around to jab a finger in Dustin's direction. "You have no idea what are in those things."

"Come on, they're probably edible."

"For Pokémon. Not humans. Just wait, we're almost there." Steve turned around and continued walking. Eevee trotted along next to him and he had the feeling she was thoroughly amused by the whole thing.

Steve ignored the muttering and rustling from behind him. The

tunnel was quiet except for their footsteps and the occasional scuff of a Pokémon. It was dark and the air was faintly bittersweet, but that was a cave for you.

Steve paused mid-step and sniffed again. Eevee slowed next to him, fur ruffling as she scented the air. Her whole body tensed and she stared down the tunnel like she was waiting for something. Joltik moved relentlessly against his shoulder.

"Hey, does anyone-" Steve started, voice quiet to not be overheard. The sudden coughing behind him startled him enough to make him jerk around.

Dustin was scrubbing his tongue, half of a Poké Puff in one hand. He spat, shuddering at the taste.

"Eugh, it tastes like sugar and pinto beans."

Steve was about to say *I told you not to* when Eevee yanked on his pants with her teeth. The smell was stronger, nearly overwhelming the tunnel. She tugged again and jumped, scrambling towards his belt.

It all clicked in a rush.

"Max, put Joltik in his Poké Ball." Steve said, cupping the Pokémon and quickly handing him over to her. She stared at him in surprise, but Steve didn't answer the question clear on her face. He grabbed Eevee's Poké Ball and in a rush of bright light she was safely stowed away. A moment later Joltik was gone too.

"Steve?" Dustin asked.

"Someone is using a lure," Steve hissed quietly, rummaging around in his backpack. He found it at the bottom, under a couple of dirty shirts. He had almost forgotten to buy more of it at all.

"A lure?" Lucas demanded. "Those are illegal!"

Steve didn't answer, instead turning the Max Repel on himself. It didn't smell any better than the lure and was sticky against his skin. He shook the can and turned on the kids, giving them just enough

warning for them to close their eyes before dousing them in a fine mist. He didn't have much and before long the can was empty.

"What-" Max tried to say and grimaced as she accidentally tasted the spray.

"We need to get past the lure and out of the tunnel. We can call the police once we're there." He said firmly and shouldered his backpack. "If anyone sees you, run. Do not start a battle." He gave them each a look, then quickly headed down the tunnel.

"What the hell is going on?" Dustin demanded, jogging to keep up. "Steve?"

Steve waved a hand at him and paused long enough to peer around the corner.

The lure had been set up dead center of the tunnel, where a few other branching paths met. A few standing lights illuminated the cave. Whismurs were clogging up the area, drawn in despite the danger. There were several people, all dressed in dark clothes, slowly and meticulously capturing all the Pokémon. Steve gritted his teeth and looked for the exit.

"What the fuck?" Dustin breathed, leaning around Steve to get a look. Max and Lucas did the same and Steve pushed them all back until they were hidden behind the curve.

"What are they doing with them?" Max demanded.

"I don't know," Steve said, though he had a few ideas. Where Whismurs delicacies? No, it must be something else. Would anyone pay for a Whismur? It was possible, though they weren't exactly the most popular Pokémon. He really couldn't think of a good reason to target them.

But *they* never really needed a reason, did they?

"We have to stop them," Dustin said suddenly, almost too loudly.

"No," Steve hissed. "We get past them and get the proper authorities to deal with it."

"Did you see a way past them?" Lucas shook his head as he said it. "We're gonna have to fight."

"We could go back to Rustboro." Steve said, but realized that wasn't an option. They didn't have the supplies to go back the way they had come. They really needed to get to Verdanturf Town.

"No, we can't," Dustin said with a shake of his head. "Listen, you deal with the lure and we'll take on those guys. As soon as the lure is broken, we'll leave."

"There's a little flaw in your plan," Steve pointed out. "The lure will affect our Pokémon too."

"And theirs," Lucas returned. "They're just as defenseless as we are."

"They can still beat the shit out you."

"Then you better hurry with that lure," Max suggested.

Steve took a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. The kids stared at him expectantly and he had the feeling even if he said no they'd run straight into this. The only real option was to go first to blunt any potential damage.

"Fine. Fine," he snapped and took the Poké Balls off his belt.

"Steve?"

"Here," he ordered, passing Pix to Max, Talonflame to Lucas, and Eevee to Dustin. They stared down at the Poké Balls with perplexed expressions. "Their Pokémon will be stronger. Yours will just get hurt if they try to fight. Mine can match whatever they have."

"There is no way they'll listen to us." Lucas protested.

"Then don't get into a battle." Steve suggested. "Just get to the exit."

Steve bent and felt around for a rock. There weren't many on the floor, but he found a good size one and tested it in his hand. He found a few more and eased back down the tunnel. The kids followed just a little behind.

"The tunnel is on the right," he whispered. "Make a break for it as soon as I go for the lure."

Max glanced at the rocks in his hand and asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Something stupid," he assured her.

Taking the rock, Steve stepped around the edge of the tunnel and flung it. It hit the light hard enough to make it crash to the floor, plunging one corner of the cave into darkness. Steve threw another one and it went wide, hitting the wall with a clatter. He didn't have time to go for a third.

"Hey!" One of the men shouted, stalking towards him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Steve took one last glance behind him and then plunged into the herd of Whismurs.